# WHO WROTE SHAKESPEARE? A LECTURE

**by Jenny Greeman & John Hudson (2009)**

**The Dark Lady Players, email; Darkladyplayers@aol.com**

I am Jenny Greeman, resident director of The Dark Lady Players. We are an experimental Shakespeare company based in New York City.
My own background is as an actor, and I am here to introduce my colleague John Hudson and to tell you a bit about what is called the Authorship Controversy, the question about who wrote the plays of William Shakespeare. Then John is going to tell you about the latest and and most exciting solution.

## 1. THE SHAKESPEAREAN AUTHORSHIP QUESTION

The questioning goes way back. Shakespeare died in 1616 and only seventy years later we have the first record of someone saying that *Titus Andronicus* was not written by Shakespeare but was brought by a private author to be acted. So people have been talking about it for a long time. In the UK a non profit called The Shakespearean Authorship Trust keeps the question open. There are MA degree courses in authorship studies at Brunel University in the UK and at Concordia University in Washington State. In California there is a Shakespearean Authorship Round-table, and there is also an organization called the Shakespearean Authorship Coalition that asks people to sign a petition called Doubts about Will. Most recently there was a front page article in the Wall Street Journal when one of the Supreme Court Justices, who had always supported the case for Mr Shakespeare decided to change his mind, and say they were written by someone else. Around 70 different candidates that have been put forward, and some of them have societies and web sites. There are several thousand books and articles on all this, but the best one is by John Michell Who Wrote Shakespeare?

There is no doubt that the man from Stratford-Upon-Avon, William Shakespeare gave the impression he was the author of the plays that bore his name. There is also no doubt that the other actors in the company believed that he was the author of the manuscripts he handed them. The question is could they have been mistaken? Could he simply have been a play-broker taking the credit for someone else's work? Let's look at the evidence.

**Firstly** the plays display very unusual knowledge, for instance substantial knowledge of Judaism and Hebrew texts, knowledge of the Italian language and about Italy especially Venice, and very substantial musical knowledge—more than any other playwright of the period. Nobody has ever been able to explain how Mr. Shakespeare developed this knowledge, what friends he had or what social networks he belonged to that would have given him this skill set. He could not have learned Hebrew or Italian in Stratford-Upon-Avon. So that makes it very likely he was simply passing off plays that had been written by someone else who had those skills.

**Secondly** it is quite common for writers to use pseudonyms—especially if their work contains explosive material. Hundreds of women writers have used male pseudonyms and the Pseudonyms and Nicknames Dictionary lists over 80,000 of them in all. For instance Sir Thomas More wrote his book against Martin Luther under the name of a living person, William Ross. The long poems *Venus & Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* are the first to mention the name Shake-Speare. Later, around 1595, Mr Shakspere *changed the spelling of the name he used in London* to correspond to the name that later began appearing on the plays. Like someone in the *Importance of Being Earnest*, he was Shakespeare in the town and Shakspere in the country.

Other actors of the period like William Fennor, earned extra cash as play brokers, who fronted plays for money. Mr Shakespeare would not have turned down an opportunity to make money by being a play broker. Legal records show him as obsessed with tiny amounts of money, as a money lender, a tax dodger, who threatened someone with murder in a loan scandal. He also seems to have had unknown sources of income that did not come from his known businesses, but enabled him to buy a mansion in Stratford very early on in his career.

**Thirdly** if he was a play broker this would explain why his Will is totally lacking in intellectual interests. It mentions no books or manuscripts—for instance those listing the changes to *Titus Andronicus* or *Othello* that were later made in the First Folio. Francis Bacon made a will disposing of his manuscripts. The will of Edward Allen—the chief actor of The Rose Theatre-- disposed of his books, so did those of several other actors. But not Mr Shakespeare.

**Fourthly** if he was merely a play broker this also explains why almost nobody in London seems to have known Shakespeare personally as a literary colleague ---at a time when a writer's social circle could easily have over a hundred people. The one exception was Ben Jonson who for some reason gave very ambiguous evidence;

- Jonson praises the author, yet in one case compares the author to a matron.
- Jonson listed Mr. Shakespeare as an actor in his plays but in Every Man Out of His Humour he satirizes Shakespeare as a fool and a rural bumpkin;
- he says that Mr Shakespeare was to be "most faulted" for giving the actors manuscripts that were unblotted, ie. fair copies. He

allowed the actors to believe---in their "ignorance" Jonson says--that the manuscripts were his originals and that he wrote them without blotting a line, ie. without making any corrections. No wonder the actors much admired him. It would have been a truly miraculous feat to create 3000 pages of play manuscripts without blots, when Mr. Shakespeare's Will has dozens of blots or corrections in only 3 pages.

**2. WHO WROTE THE PLAYS?**

So who wrote the plays? Out of the 70 or so candidates I am now going to run quickly through the main ones and say a little about each. If you want to know more about them Google THE SHAKESPEARE SHOW and STEAL THIS RADIO to listen to a radio play that John and I wrote about them.

The most popular candidate is the **Earl of Oxford**. He traveled in Italy, and had his own theater company and one account suggests he wrote a play. But if he had his own theater company—and was constantly needing money-- why would he have written plays and given them to another company who took all the profits. Why did he not give them to his own company? In any case he died in 1604, and *the Scottish play* makes several references to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. So he drops out.

Another popular candidate is **Sir Francis Bacon**, the earl of St Albans. He was very smart and a writer, but he was not a poet. Also he was deeply engaged in writing books on history and philosophy and very busy with his career as England's chief lawyer, so he would not have had the time to spend writing these very complex scholarly plays. He also had no relationship to the company that performed them.

Sometimes **Christopher Marlowe** is regarded as a candidate, but he died in 1593, so unless someone faked his death and he was smuggled abroad he could not have written the plays over the next 20 years. Moreover, although the early plays show Marlowe's influence, that declines over the years. Also since the plays are full of contemporary allusions and required detailed knowledge of the acting company, even if Marlowe was living secretly abroad, he could not have had the necessary knowledge.

Finally there is **Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke**. She only wrote a few minor poems and was a believing Christian--who would not have written plays containing Jewish religious allegories. She also had nothing to do with the theater company that performed Shakespeare's plays after 1594---although her own company did perform a couple of the early ones. One of the other problems is that the author of the S*onnets* called themselves poor and despised, lacking honours and proud titles, and expected to be buried in a common grave. That just doesn't fit with Mary Sidney who owned most of Wiltshire, held the title of Countess—one of the highest titles in the land—and knew she would be buried in a grand tomb in Salisbury cathedral.

**3. WHY DOES IT MATTER WHO WROTE THEM?**

So none of the existing candidates is plausible as the author of the plays, but so what? Why should this matter? It matters because in order to understand a text you have to understand **who wrote it** and **where it came from.**

For example if the Gospel of Matthew was written by the disciples of a historical Jesus, as an eye-witness account, that would give it one set of meanings. Alternatively if it was written at the Court of the Flavian

Caesars as a piece of Roman war propaganda, designed to deceive the Jews into worshipping a fictional pacifist messiah, you would read the Gospel quite differently—you wouldn't believe a word of it.

Similarly, if the plays were written as divinely inspired works by a simple Catholic countryman from Stratford that would be one thing. But if they were written as works of carefully constructed literary scholarship to communicate multi-layered theological allegories, making Hebrew and Italian puns and anti-Christian jokes, they would have completely different meanings. The view you take changes how you read the text, the levels of meanings that you look for, and how you **perform** those meanings on stage. So it matters a great deal who wrote them and **why** they wrote them.

One of the problems today is that most Shakespeare performances go on in a vacuum. As Mike Daisey puts it most theaters are "mashing up Shakespeare until it is a thin lifeless paste that any reasonable person would reject as disgusting." One reason directors mash up the plays is because there is no biography to relate them to. There is almost nothing in Mr. Shakespeare's life history to explain why he should have written so many plays about Italy, 2 plays about Venice, so many Italian marriage comedies, a play about Jews, and another about Moors. It does not explain why there are so many strong women characters who are musical and literate and who dress up as men. He kept his wife and daughters illiterate so he wasn't writing out of his own life experience. Did Mr. Shakespeare write all these wonderful details because he did amazing empathetic research? Or alternatively did those things form part of **someone else's** life….. the person who really wrote the plays.

And to answer that question I will pass you over to John Hudson, the founder and dramaturge of the Dark Lady Players.

**4. AMELIA BASSANO LANIER**

Thank you Jenny. Over 400 years researchers have investigated almost every conceivable person as a possible author of Shakespeare's plays, including one who did not even exist, except as a spelling mistake, who nonetheless became the subject of two books.

And in all those years there was one person who got overlooked. And I cannot help thinking that the reason she was overlooked was because of her skin color and because she was Jewish. It was literally unthinkable to white male Shakespeare scholars that a black, Jewish, feminist, woman poet could have written these plays—even though she was the first woman to publish a book of original poetry, came from a theatrical family deeply involved in the company that performed the plays, and even though she was the mistress to the man in charge of the English theater. In retrospect, we can see now that she was in fact the most obvious candidate but for hundreds of years gender, ethnicity and religion blinkered everyone so much that they literally could not see her. Jenny and I are doing our very best to help take off those blinkers.

Her name of course is Amelia Bassano Lanier. My 5,000 word article on her has just been published in the peer reviewed journal The Oxfordian, the journal of Shakespearean authorship studies. I will refer you to that article for the detail. For those who are truly interested, the draft first volume of my 4 volume biography of her is available on Scribd.com. It is called The Dark Lady: The Woman who wrote Shakespeare and covers the years 1587-1593. For the rest of this lecture I want to tell you a little about her remarkable life and how she is a perfect match for the areas of

rare knowledge shown in the plays. I will then finish up by talking about how the discovery of her as the author transforms the way that the plays can be performed.

She was born in 1569, in London, five years after Mr. Shakespeare. Her family were hidden Jews, known as Marranos or Conversos, who had come over from Venice in the 1530's to be the court recorder troupe for Henry 8th. Their police records describe them as being 'black' which may just reflect a dark Sephardic appearance, or may reflect their original Moroccan ancestry. We know that they spoke Italian at home because we have records of them cursing the police in that language as well as their letters in Italian to the Queen. They lived almost immediately opposite the theater district, and were responsible for playing stage music at Court. Amelia's family also accounted for half of the musicians who played the music for the company—later known as the King's Men-- that had the monopoly on performing the Shakespearean plays. Of the surviving music for the Shakespearean plays, most of it was written by Amelia's first cousin the lutist Robert Johnson….including famous tunes like 'Where The Bee Sucks, There Suck I' and 'Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lieth'.

At the age of 7 Amelia's father died and she was given to be educated by the Willoughby family. Her 'stepmother' Susan Bertie the dowager Countess of Kent lived partly in her home in Greenwich and partly in the family mansion Willoughby House, in the city, the location of the present day Barbican. Her mother was well known as an early Tudor feminist who was part of a women's Bible study group at Court, read the Bible in multiple translations and encouraged all women to read the Bible for themselves. Susan Bertie's brother, the Lord Willoughby was one of England's leading generals and the Ambassador to Denmark and a personal friend of Tycho Brahe, whose astronomy is used in *Hamlet*.

At the age of 13 or so  Amelia became the mistress to Lord Hunsdon the son of Mary Boleyn and Queen Elizabeth's cousin if not her half brother. Amelia lived with him in his princely palace in the Strand for the next ten years. Not only was he Lord Chamberlain, the man in charge of the English theater, and the patron of the company that performed the Shakespearean plays. He also had a garden of rare plants, was the Royal Falconer, the general in charge of London, and held three judge-ships.

So I hope you are beginning to see how Amelia's biography—unlike that of Mr. Shakespeare—has an exact fit with the knowledge of Italian and Venice, the knowledge of Judaism, the very unusual knowledge of music, the knowledge of Denmark, rare plants, the law, generalship, the Court, Kentish flower names, astronomy, and Bible translation. Not to speak of the playwright's knowledge about menstruation, abortion recipes, sewing, pastry making and literature written for young women. I don't think Marlowe or Greene or John Lyly wrote about menstruation in their plays.

After living with Lord Hunsdon for ten years, in 1592 at the age of 23 Amelia got pregnant for the final time and could not have another abortion. She was expelled from Court and married off to a cousin, a minstrel for the sake of appearances. We know little about her life until nearly 20 years later when she published a book of poetry under her own name with a Latin title—*Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the first book of original poetry published by a woman. It has unique words and word clusters that only appear in the plays, makes more allusions to Shakespeare than to anyone else, and uses unique Shakespearean metaphors like comparing Jews to 'wolves'.

Of course because there were no Jews in England in the 16th century[i], Amelia's religious identity was as a Marrano, which in Elizabethan London was not defined in terms of ethnicity or birth, but by belief and practice. But evidently the experience of living in Christian England was sufficiently alien to her that she created the crucifixion parody in *Salve Deus*, and those in the plays, of which the death of Bottom/Pyramus is perhaps the clearest example.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Pyramus and Thisbe were a well known allegory for Jesus and the Church. Jesus dies for the love of the Church so Pyramus dies for the love of Thisbe. The Wall which is the wittiest partition that anyone has ever heard, is the Partition that exists between Earth and Heaven and comes down on the day of Apocalypse. So the death of Pyramus and Thisbe is a parody of the Partition coming down, so the allegorical Jesus and the allegorical church can finally unite—except it all goes wrong and both die. To prove the point, look at the way that Pyramus dies. The account begins and ends with the word PASSION. In between the light disappears, there is a stabbing in the side, and a reference to "die die die" which refers to the dice-playing or lot casting at the foot of the cross. It is a comic heretical Passion Story. In other words, in the same way that *Salve Deus* is a heretical crucifixion parody, so is the death of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both are comic, Jewish, anti-Christian parodies. Whoever wrote one, wrote the other. And that 20 years blank period in between Amelia being expelled from Court and writing *Salve Deus*, just happens to be the precise 20 years when some great poet wrote the plays of William Shakespeare.

Unlike other authorship candidates Amelia Bassano did not have money and proud titles nor a tomb reserved in a cathedral. By 1609 she was

close to  becoming a pauper, and in 1645 would end up buried in a common grave, just like she predicted in the Sonnets.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE

Professor Kelly Morgan says that this research "opens up breathtaking new avenues for performance".  I would add that it creates a whole raft of exciting new career opportunities for actors,directors and dramaturges.

In particular Amelia's authorship of the plays supports the new understanding that is emerging that the Shakespearean plays were written as allegories--Jewish religious allegories. But let me give you a quick introduction to Allegories. They are not unusual. For instance Harry Potter is a religious allegory. Harry is an allegory for Christ. Whereas the Christ figure is imagined as having a halo or nimbus, Harry has a broomstick named nimbus. Whereas Jesus was supposedly holy, Harry has a wand made out of holly, which derives from holy and repels evil. Harry's most powerful spell 'expecto patronum' is Church Latin for  'I look for the Savior' and generates a stag, a traditional symbol of Christ. Both Christ and Harry fight against the powers of evil and demons/dementors. Both began in humble circumstance, in the case of HP sleeping in a broom closet, his equivalent to the stable. Jesus was born to Mary who was associated with a lily the symbol of the annunciation, Harry's mother was called Lily. And so on.

But unlike Harry Potter, the different plays do not tell a single coherent story with 30 or so characters, but have well over a thousand. Moreover, instead of being simple allegorical transpositions of the themes in the New Testament they are complex inversions, reversals and parodies of them. And instead of being written to covertly **promote** the message of

Christianity they were written for the opposite reason, to covertly **oppose** it.

So for instance in *Hamlet* Ophelia is an allegory for the Virgin Mary, and the sewing scene and nunnery scenes are re-writings of the Annunciation. Ophelia falls off the willow branch and hangs between earth and heaven wearing a coronet and singing psalms—like in the Ascension of Mary—but she dies. In *Midsummer Night's Dream* as I just outlined Bottom is an allegory for Jesus, and Thisbe is an allegory for the church, and the play within the play is a comic parody of the apocalypse and the crucifixion in which Jesus and the church both die. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse, Angelica, is the Angel Gabriel who mentions Susan because this is from the Hebrew word for lily, the symbol that the Angel gives to Mary in paintings of the Annunciation—and Juliet stabs herself. *As You Like It* is a Biblical allegory from Paradise to the Flood, covering in the process two characters called 'Jakes' (the Elizabethan for toilet) and another who is an allegory for its inventor, and the implicit flood or flush at the end drowns almost everyone in the play. The existence of these anti-Christian religious allegories is a good clue that the plays were written by someone who was not a Christian—and there was only one Jewish poet in London at the time.

But the decisive, statistically valid evidence, is that Amelia has even left her **literary signatures** on the plays. You probably know that the major symbol for the great poet was a swan dying to music. It was a classical image that derived from Ovid and gives us the expression 'swan-song'. There are only 3 cases of a swan dying to music in the plays. One is in MOV where it refers to **Bassanio** dying in Portia's tears. Another is in King John, where the person who says it is Henry, **John's son**. The other is in Othello where it is said by the character **Amelia** who repeats part of

the **Willow** song and says what doth thy song bode lady, I will die like a swan, willow willow willow. These four words Amelia, Johnson, Willough(by) Bassanio are the first name, maiden name, adopted name, and family name of the woman I am talking about. Statistically, this cannot be a co-incidence. She has left her names on the plays associating herself with the Renaissance image of the great poet just waiting for us to pay attention. It has only taken 400 years…

We have just enough time to get the word out before the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Salve Deus* in October 2010. So my message for all of you, is go and tell someone. Look at the videos online, especially The Dark Lady Discovery, and email us at Darkladyplayers@aol.com. And if you or your friends and family know people in a publisher or a film studio or a newspaper or a tv channel or a Foundation or anyone who could help spread the word, or support the Dark Lady Players in our work, then you know what you have to do. This is the chance of a lifetime to be in on the ground floor of a major new Shakespeare discovery and build skills in performing Shakespearean allegories. Organize a group here on campus. Invite us back. Tell your friends in other universities. We have a movement to build here people!

---

[i] Roger Prior identified the Bassano family as Marrano Jews in his articles 'The Bassanos of Tudor England' *Jewish Chronicle* Literary Supplement June 1st 1979, p. 10-11 and 'Jewish Musicians at the Tudor Court' *Musical Quarterly* (1983) LXIX: 253-265. His arguments were primarily about the settlement pattern of the family in London which moved as an entire unit, their clinging to their past, their characteristic Jewish trades, and Bassano as a well known 16th century Jewish name. He also notes that Amelia's book title "has little point unless she is one of the Judaei". This was subsequently expanded in the major biography of the family by David Lasocki and Roger Prior *The Bassanos*; *Venetian Musicians and Instrument makers in England 1531-1665*, Aldershot,England; Scolar Press (1995). The identification was questioned by Alessio Ruffatti in an article 'Italian Musicians at the Tudor Court—Were They Really Jews?'

*Jewish Historical Studies* 35 (1996-1998);1-14. However David Lasocki and Richard W. Griscom in their book *The Recorder:A Research and Information Guide* Routledge Music Bibliographies Series (2003) p.124 note that Ruffati "distorts or ignores Prior's evidence".